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12-1-2003

Book Review: Vistas comerciales y culturales

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Recommended Citation

Lee, Lina. Vistas comerciales y culturales. *Hispania*, 86(4), 825-826, 2003. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20062946>

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Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Vistas comerciales y culturales* by Danielle Cahill and Sandra de los Ríos

Review by: Lina Lee

Source: *Hispania*, Vol. 86, No. 4 (Dec., 2003), pp. 825-826

Published by: American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20062946>

Accessed: 31-05-2017 17:28 UTC

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in Spanish American fiction. He is quick to denounce fuzzy thinking and lack of clarity (both in structure and in detail). As he says at the onset, his aim is “to sketch out the broad outlines of the successive phases of fiction in Spanish America, using the work of representative writers to illustrate the developing patterns” (1). The larger patterns that he examines cut across national lines: he considers Spanish America as a single culture, although he is scrupulous about noting individual writers’ specificities. The writers whose bodies of work Shaw describes for the most part represent a very traditional canon. He thinks about the relationship of the canonical texts to others written by the same authors in ways that are perceptive, rather than isolating the superstar novels (or to a lesser extent, short stories) and he relates each writer’s development to the changes in literary style, structure and emphasis in the sequence of Romanticism, Realism, Naturalism, Modernismo, Indigenism, Regionalism, Aftermath of Modernismo, Pre-Boom, Boom, Post-Boom and Postmodernism. There is nothing surprising about the choice of labels: every literary history (and every syllabus) tries to impose order upon reality through categorization; what is startling and interesting in Shaw’s analysis is the depth and the range of his generalizations. His selection of a few representative writers of each group to be quite thoroughly analyzed in a few condensed pages works well. It could be simplistic, but Shaw’s curmudgeonly precision offers an unusually high meaning-to-words ratio. His straightforward language will delight readers who are exhausted by theoretical obfuscation. There are other books for those who yearn for dependency theory, post-colonialism and sexuality studies (*The Companion to Latin American Studies*, for instance, edited by Philip Swanson [London: Arnold, 2003], offering very limited literary examples, but a series of theoretical frameworks or lenses).

Beginning with Lizardi’s *Lazarillo de ciegos caminantes* (1773), Shaw places major works of Spanish American fiction within their intellectual literary movements, as well as tracing each writer’s evolution. Quotations are brief but extremely well chosen, and a select number of others’ critical opinions of the major works are cited (and often praised or demolished). Each chapter contains both footnotes and a short, well-chosen, annotated bibliography at the end, and most of the mentioned titles are included in a bibliography at the end of the book as well. It is a *Companion* that should be useful for any level of reader. Shaw is particularly acute at summarizing conflicting critics’ views of the books he describes; he captures a sense of how reading is a fascinating, interactive enterprise in a constant state of dramatic change, reevaluation and even contradiction.

A self-portrait of Frida Kahlo stares balefully at us from the dust jacket, her aggressive unease appropriate for a book that prioritizes the traditional, conventional male canon yet does include a substantial number of women and good discussion of how they fit into the movements described here. As in over a dozen previous concisely-written books, Donald Shaw has entertained, exasperated and educated his readers, analyzing structures and ideas and movements with energetic enthusiasm that is always stimulating. And fun to read.

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LINGUISTICS

Cahill, Danielle and Sandra de los Ríos. *Vistas comerciales y culturales*. Boston, MA: Heinle and Heinle, 2002. ISBN 0-03-031606-5. 347 pp.

Vistas comerciales y culturales is a new text focusing on teaching Spanish business and culture for fourth-semester Intermediate Spanish programs at college level. It is accompanied by a workbook/lab manual, audio CDs and videocassette along with a web-site linked to additional cultural resources. The use of content-based materials in this text meets the needs of students who study in business-related programs, and offers a transitional step between middle- and upper-level Business Spanish courses.

The entire text is written in Spanish with the exception of some unfamiliar lexical items and

grammar examples translated into English, and a real-life situation given in English in each chapter. Maps of South America, Mexico, Central America, Spain and the entire world are included at the beginning of the text to help acquaint students with the geographical areas of Spanish-related countries. In addition, the rules of Spanish pronunciation, the most commonly-used verb conjugations of both regular and irregular verbs, object pronouns including direct, indirect and reflexives, and systems of numbers, measurements and temperature can be quickly referenced at the end of the text.

Each of the book's eight chapters focuses on a business-related topic and a country or region of the Spanish-speaking world; each is organized into four major sections: *Pasos de iniciación*, *Estructuras fundamentales*, *Actividades comunicativas* and *Panorama cultural*. In *Pasos de iniciación*, pre-reading exercises with the focus on vocabulary learning, along with tips for reading comprehension, are included to provide students with meaningful contexts in which to use the new words and expressions related to the reading. Several post-reading activities follow to check student reading comprehension. This reviewer found the open-ended exercise immediately following the reading too difficult for students to figure out on their own. It would seem logical to include a comprehension check using the true-false type of exercises before these open-ended questions. Therefore, this reviewer suggests that the order of "Comprensión de lectura" and "Verdadero o falso" should be switched. One of the most appealing features of this text is the "Más terminología comercial" section which offers practical and real-life situations for oral and written practices. A video segment related to the theme of each chapter follows to emphasize cross-cultural awareness and understanding.

Estructuras fundamentales reviews major grammar points in Spanish along with a variety of exercises, such as fill-in-the-blank, open-ended, and pair-work. The grammar explanations are concise and less detailed, using examples in Spanish to compare and contrast with English structures. Many exercises are related to the chapter theme, enabling students to apply the particular grammar concept to functionally-based activities in other sections of the chapter. One of the most useful components of this section is *Palabras que engañan* which presents words that are often confused by students at the Intermediate level of proficiency, such as "pedir" vs. "preguntar," "asistir" vs. "atender." While visual aids, such as pictures, photos or charts, are helpful to students' understanding of the material, the text font in several drawings is too small to read (e.g., 104, 123 and 129). The quality of those drawings could be improved for future editions.

Student listening, writing and speaking skills are reinforced through additional exercises found in the *Actividades comunicativas* section which consists of three parts—¡Escuchemos!, *Prácticas orales* and ¡Escribamos! Most of the well-constructed activities use a wide range of authentic business documents including advertisements, letters, faxes and invoices to offer students unique opportunities to practice and develop their communicative skills using words and expressions learned from previous sections. Finally, each *Panorama cultural* section contains one authentic reading drawn from magazines and newspapers designed to allow students to explore contemporary cultural topics of the Spanish-speaking world. *Actividades de expansión en la Red electrónica*, as the last section of each chapter, includes several web-based and library research activities that allow students to explore further cultural topics at their own pace and later to share their points of view with the class.

Despite a few drawbacks, *Vistas comerciales y culturales* is a fine text for students who want to explore topics in both the cultural and business worlds. From an instructional point of view, this text provides very good and manageable sources. Thus, *Vistas comerciales y culturales* is a worthwhile choice as a reader for a college-level Intermediate Spanish course.

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Olazagasti-Segovia, Elena. *Sorpresas*. Boston: Heinle and Heinle, 2002. ISBN 0-03-032656-7. 225 pp.